

The Way It Was

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UNIT: Hawaiian Air Force

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Wednesday, November the 26th, 1941 all first three grades of the enlisted personnel were briefed that morning that we were on a war alert status with the Japanese empire. All the Air Corps would be credited for wartime service until further notice. We were given two areas of probability of attack which were the Philippines and/or Wake Island. The Hawaiian Islands were never mentioned in the briefing. It is history now on where and when this attack actually occurred.



On Saturday, December the 6th we were notified that the alert was discontinued and that we were back on regular status. All aircraft were brought in from revetments and camouflaged areas where they had been parked while on alert. For the first and only time, all aircraft were parked wing tip to wing tip and the next row was parked empannage or tail section to wing trailing edge of the opposite row. Row after row. We had never been instructed to park aircraft like this before. We questioned our superiors why they were being parked this way and were told by headquarters that it was easier to guard the planes this way from sabotage.

On Sunday, December the 7th, I was aroused from my sleep by my friend, Philip Paragan, who wanted to return a favor by inviting me to breakfast at the main PX on the field. My quarters were located in the large barracks fronting on Wright Avenue. I was in charge of the instrument flying department located at the lower level of the barracks fronting Santos Dumont Avenue. I was billeted in an adjoining room to my department. We left my sleeping area and walked from Santos Dumont Avenue to Wright Avenue approximately 400 feet. On the adjacent corner was the large 3 story new barracks. Just when I was turned westbound on Wright Avenue, I heard a tremendous explosion which shook the ground. I saw fire and billowing black smoke. I didn't know it then but this was the first bomb drop that started World War II for the United States of America.

I did not realize what had happened but thought maybe some aircraft had crashed although I couldn't see any evidence of this. The next instant, I saw two Japanese VAL dive bombers with the red meatball on the side of the fuselage. I was dumbfounded. I couldn't believe what I was witnessing. I stood rooted to the ground unable to move. On my right, I heard another aircraft winding up in a dive. I looked up and saw one Japanese VAL dive bomber aiming for the new three story barracks. It looked like he was right on top of me. I saw the bomb release from the plane as the pilot pulled up to the right to avoid the bomb blast. As the bomb was falling, it seemed like it was suspended for an eternity, falling directly overhead. My life flashed before

my eyes and I thought I was going to die. All I could remember was seeing the flash. When I came to, the bomb had landed directly across the street from me between two homes. Luckily, Wright avenue is higher on the north side of the street than the south side where I was standing, therefore I received the concussion of the blast and not the shrapnel. I awoke, finding myself crawling on my hands and knees towards the barracks. I had red lava dirt embedded in every part of my body. I couldn't hear, I couldn't see, I couldn't stand but managed to get across the street into the lower level of the barracks where I knew the quartermaster had stored mattresses. I don't know what happened to my friend and I never saw him again. I wedged myself in between the mattresses, anticipating another bomb blast.

I wasn't there for more than a couple of minutes when I heard a voice calling out if anyone was there. I answered and showed myself. A pilot, who was a Major, asked me if I had any experience on a 50 caliber machine gun on an anti-aircraft mount. I told him that I had. He asked me to follow him. We broke into the supply area and took two 50 caliber guns. One gun was set up on the hangar side and the other one on the northeast end of the building. We did this between the first and second wave. The remaining men took 30 caliber machine guns over the side of the balconies on the first, second, and third floors. They then laid mattresses over the balcony railings to shield themselves from the millions of rounds of ammunition that was stored in a hangar destined for Wake island. One of the dive bombers had set this on fire and the ammunition was flying everywhere. During the second wave we fired at all the Japanese aircraft that were strafing the hangar line, parking ramp and buildings. I was in charge of the gun on the roof that faced the hangar line. One man fed the ammo belt and cleared stoppages while I held the hook on my shoulders to incline the gun downward to fire at the Japanese planes. Another man was triggering the gun. Upon the Major's orders, we fired wherever directed.

In between the first and second wave, a B-17D from March Air Force Base tried to land at Hickam field but the runway was gone. They then tried to land on our field. The other men on the northeast end of the barracks manning the other 50 caliber machine gun started shooting at the B-17. It was a new model that we had never seen before that had a different kind of dorsal fin. The Major and our men were watching the B-17 from our gun station. We saw the pilot and three men from the left waistgunner's position leaning out of the plane waving anything they could get hold of to let us know that they were friendly and on our side so we wouldn't shoot them down. The Major ran over to the other gun station with his weapon drawn and threatened to shoot the gunner if he didn't stop shooting at the B-17. He stopped shooting and they landed safely. During the second wave, we continued to fire on Japanese war planes until the guns were so hot that the bullets would no longer feed into the barrel and it would no longer fire. These guns were water cooled and we had no water. We stayed on the roof until we were sure that there were no more aircraft strafing the field. In the hours that followed, we really didn't know what to do. Looking around me I saw total destruction of all the aircraft. We went down to the parking ramp to see if there was anything that we could salvage but it was useless.

About 1600 hours I received orders to take two working 50 caliber machine guns with M-2 mounts and seven men to the west end of the field. We dug our entrenchments with the following orders: Whiskey alert! Shoot down anything! Wine alert! If you can identify your target as being Japanese, shoot it! Water alert! Hold your fire!

During the evening, just after dark, we were on Whiskey alert. We heard an aircraft approaching the field with navigation lights on. We thought it was a trick and when the aircraft came into our sights, we shot him down. A half hour later we received a communications phone and were given a message to hold our fire. A Navy fighter was coming in. I informed command that he had already come in, and we had shot him down. A half hour later we heard the medics going out to aid the pilot. It seemed like every 50 feet they were challenged by a sentry. I told my men that if they challenged that meat wagon that I was going to shoot them. It was so dark that you couldn't see your hand in front of your face. All you could hear was the word "halt!" They finally reached the Navy pilot and found him to be alive and in Kipapa Gulch with his cockpit sticking up in the air, still strapped in. The fuselage was broken in two parts. We were firing tracers and thought that the fuselage of the plane should have looked like a sieve but it didn't. We must have clipped the ignition harness on his engine. Very few bullets actually hit the plane. After they rescued the pilot he told the medics to tell us that he had been in a gun battle out at sea with a Japanese fighter that had fired at him striking his leg and breaking it. His injuries were not from us. That made my day! I never did get breakfast that day. That red dirt trench was our home for three days. We caught rain water in our canteen cup to drink and found some guavas to eat. Many men lost their lives that day. We were just happy to be alive.